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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001148

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE DELTA

1.(SBU) SUMMARY: Three third-country nationals employed by a U.S. oil servicing firm were kidnapped June 23 by an Ijaw criminal group in the swamps of Delta State. Shell is managing the crisis and claims it will not accede to demands of a ransom. Meanwhile, unconfirmed reports indicate the military is attempting a rescue. End Summary.

2.(SBU) Anglo-Dutch Shell and Ft. Lauderdale-based Seabulk International confirmed press reports of the June 23 kidnapping of three expatriate staff on a Seabulk boat near the Warri Southwest local government area (LGA). The boat, one of 24 vessels deployed in the Niger Delta by Seabulk, was fulfilling a contract by Panama-based Willbros for Shell's production and drilling platforms on the Yokri field in Forcados. The boat, manned by 12 expatriates (none American), was confronted by 45 armed "pirates," according to officials of both companies. Reportedly the bandits were from neighboring (to the east) LGAs of Borutu and Bomadi. The German captain and two Filipino crew members were taken by the pirates and are apparently being held in the creeks of Borutu or Bomadi.

3.(SBU) Shell, the operator of the platform and an oil company experienced in dealing with Niger hostage-takings, is trying to resolve the incident with the consent of Seabulk and Willbros, according to Seabulk's Port Harcourt-based Operations Officer Tomasz Maczka. In a June 30 conversation with Embassy's Corporate Responsibility Officer (CRO), Maczka explained that Shell established an Emergency Response Team (ERT) at its Warri Zonal Headquarters. Shortly after the hostage-taking, Shell received a letter demanding an immediate payment of 400,000 naira (approximately USD 3,000) for food for the hostages and a ransom of 25 million naira (approximately USD 200,000). According to Maczka, Shell also received photos of the hostages and passed these on to the Seabulk General Manager, Roy Donaldson, who has moved to Shell's Warri zonal headquarters.

4.(SBU) Maczka expressed unhappiness with Shell's decision to release a June 26 public statement giving details of the kidnapping, enunciating Shell's policy of not paying ransom to criminals, and appealing to the Nigerian government to resolve the crisis. He claimed that Shell did not consult Seabulk or Willbros on the statement. Maczka also drew a connection between this publicity and June 30 press reports that the Nigerian Army and Navy have deployed troops to Borutu and Bomadi LGAs in an attempt to rescue the hostages -- a move not welcomed by the Seabulk official.

5.(SBU) According to Shell's Director for External Relations, Precious Omoku, Shell took the lead in this situation to ensure that the two service contractors (Willbros and Seabulk) did not pay ransom for the three expatriates. He confirmed that Shell was in contact with the hostage-takers and was preparing through them food and medicine for the hostages. He claimed the Commander of the Army's 7th Battalion in Warri has refuted the June 30 press report of a military rescue operation. Omoku further disclosed that the chief of Shell's ERT was apparently shot at his residence the night of June 28; cause of the shooting or identity of any assailant is unknown. To be safe, Shell has appointed a new ERT chief.

16. (SBU) CRO on June 30 contacted Bello Oboko, President of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC) -- the group of armed Ijaw youth responsible for the ongoing security crisis in the three Warri LGAs. Oboko claimed he was aware of the kidnapping but vowed his "boys" were not responsible. He attributed this act to Ijaw "pirates" outside of FNDIC's area of operations. Oboko expressed annoyance with this action at a time when FNDIC is attempting to guarantee the operational safety of oil company personnel and facilities in order to resume production in the creeks of Warri (to be reported septel). The leader of the Warri militants stated that he would find out who committed the kidnappings and attempt to secure the hostages' release.

7.(SBU) Ijaw leader Chief Edwin K. Clark told CRO July 1 that he will soon host, at his Uhwelli residence, a meeting with the Ijaw leaders of the Borutu and Bomadi villages in which the hostage-taking "pirates" operate. Disclosing that he knows the boys behind the kidnapping, Clark said that he opposed their "criminal behavior" and he would use this meeting to pressure the communities to give up the hostages and exert greater control over the criminal elements in their ranks.

8.(SBU) Comment: Although the hostages are not AMCITS, this new incident involves two U.S. companies with substantial investments in the Niger Delta. The companies' decision to allow Shell to take the lead is probably wise and hopefully will lead to an outcome with no casualties or injuries. However, we are concerned about the possibility of an attempted military rescue effort. The military lacks the discipline and skills necessary to conduct a surgical rescue in the harsh environment of the Delta. The wild card in this crisis is the FNDIC Ijaw militants, who may take on the unusual role of rescuers as they seek to promote an image of peace-makers and protectors.  
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